The Secular Ghosts of Park Street

Sreejith Kalandy

A Reflection on Cosmopolitan Memory, Coexistence, and the Layered Soul of a Kolkata Street.

As Bengal changes politically and socially, the other day I went to Flurys on Park Street, ordered its iconic English breakfast, and sat looking out through its glass façade, wondering. Outside, a young man with an unkempt beard was rendering English ballads from the seventies with quiet beauty. Near him, another man was sketching chalk art on the pavement. Passers-by of different sorts occasionally made their contributions.

Like a few such places, Park Street seems to exist outside the ordinary flow of politics, an urban pocket where the rules governing the world beyond its borders do not quite apply. In an age of hardened identities, it still carries traces of the many worlds that once made it a cosmopolitan enclave, preserving, however precariously, a certain secular ease.

The street began as Burial Ground Road, a quiet path cutting through forests past tigers and dacoits, leading to what is now South Park Street Cemetery, then on the edges of the colonial city. As Kolkata expanded, the road shed its funereal name and became Park Street, turning from a passage for the dead into a corridor of leisure, sociability, and encounter.

At the street's mouth sits the Asiatic Society, William Jones's monument to Enlightenment curiosity. Behind it, in its older block, the edicts of Ashoka, who embraced Buddhism but proclaimed tolerance and pluralism, are carved in stone, marking the land's deeper civilisational inheritances despite its occasional departures from them.

From where I was sitting, on the opposite side, one of the side lanes leads to Mirza Ghalib Street, named after the Urdu poet who spent time in Kolkata, his ghazals still recited in a city that once celebrated its syncretic heritage. A little way down that lane stands the Armenian College and Philanthropic Academy, one of the last traces of a community that found in Kolkata a home, a quiet testament to the city's old instinct for shelter and inclusion. Each year, around April 24, its students and clergy join the city's Armenian community in remembering the Armenian genocide, a small annual act of mourning that lingers as a reminder of what intolerance, once normalised, can become.

At the far end of Park Street, the cemetery that gave the road its original name sprawls with weathered tombstones, most marking lives cut short by malaria and tropical fever. Henry Louis Vivian Derozio lies here, the Eurasian poet-teacher who inspired the Young Bengal movement, whose iconoclast followers scandalised nineteenth-century Hindu orthodoxy with their rationalism, irreverence, and unapologetic beef-eating.

Park Street's eateries continue that irreverent tradition. At Olypub, the iconic Parsi-owned pub, the menu has long reflected the street's easy pluralism. When a recent dispute there briefly drew wider attention, many Kolkatans reacted with discomfort, instinctively protective of the older ethos of Park Street, where such things had once passed without anxiety.

On the same side of the road, a few doors away, stands Trincas, where the distinctive voice of Usha Uthup once exhilarated late evenings and Louis Banks, later called the father of Indian jazz, made his beginning. Park Street, then and now, is where bars stay open late and Christmas transforms the street into a corridor of light.

As I came to the end of my breakfast, the sky had turned overcast and a light drizzle had begun to fall. Outside, Park Street still dazzled through the rain. Its cosmopolitanism endures, but not without strain. If this ease is finally lost, Park Street will have returned to being Burial Ground Road, not as a resting place for the colonial dead, but for a cosmopolitan culture that no longer found room to breathe.

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Sreejith Kalandy is based in Kolkata and writes on history, culture, and society.